

The Significance of TOEIC Preparation Prior to Taking the TOEIC Prediction Test or the Official TOEIC Exam

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine the importance of TOEIC preparation before taking the TOEIC Prediction Test or the official TOEIC exam. The study involved 249 students from a vocational high school in Jakarta, where the TOEIC test is administered regularly to all students. Given the importance of TOEIC preparation, the school organized a preparation session lasting 4 hours, followed by an optional TOEIC Prediction Test for students who wished to assess their expected scores. Participation in the prediction test was voluntary. A total of 249 students took the TOEIC Prediction Test. The results showed that 3 students (1.2%) scored between 800 and 900, 13 students (5.2%) scored between 700 and 799, 29 students (11.7%) scored between 600 and 699, 59 students (23.7%) scored between 500 and 599, 25 students (10%) scored between 400 and 499, 39 students (15.7%) scored between 300 and 399, and 81 students (32.5%) scored below 299. The target score for the TOEIC Prediction Test was set at above 400, and 129 students (51.8%) achieved scores above 400, while 120 students (48.2%) scored below 300. Based on these results, TOEIC preparation is essential before students take the official TOEIC exam.

Keywords: TOEIC Preparation; Prediction Test; Real Test

INTRODUCTION

In educational settings, two primary types of test preparation are often practiced: general/scholastic test preparation and preparation for English language proficiency exams (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). English test preparation, in particular, has become a widespread practice in both formal and informal learning environments. This preparation often takes the form of activities such as cram schools or shadow education, which takes place outside the traditional classroom. Students participating in such programs tend to gain an advantage over those who do not engage in these preparatory activities (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). As students increasingly recognize the importance of these high-stakes English language tests,

such as IELTS, TOEFL, or TOEIC, they understand the substantial impact these exams have on their futures, including university admissions, graduation requirements, job opportunities, and other life decisions.

Test preparation (TP) is often viewed as a form of "washback," the influence that tests have on both teaching and learning practices (Saif et al., 2019). According to Messick (in Saif et al., 2019), TP is an intervention aimed at improving test scores, though its impact on actual learning can vary. While proper preparation may help students become familiar with the testing process and improve performance, improper or overly narrow preparation risks inflating scores artificially, without enhancing the skills that the test intends to measure (Ma & Cheng, 2018). Some studies, such as Dong (2021), suggest that test preparation may have varying effects on different groups of teachers and students, potentially influencing both test scores and broader educational outcomes. Research also highlights the possibility that some preparatory methods may boost performance on specific skills—such as speaking—while yielding minimal improvements in others, like listening or writing (Knoch et al., 2020). In light of these complexities, research continues to examine the specific effects of TP on various skill sets and student groups, emphasizing the need for further exploration of the washback effect.

Over the past five years, numerous studies have focused on test preparation from diverse perspectives. While some research suggests that TP is associated with a decrease in teaching quality (Blazar & Pollard, 2017), other studies highlight the positive impacts of TP on student performance, particularly in areas such as listening (Winke & Lim, 2017). Additionally, TP has been shown to have a modest effect on score gains, especially for students whose scores are close to passing thresholds (Soler et al., 2020). While TP is often discussed in the context of improving language skills, the nature of its effects remains an important area for further investigation.

In today's globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively in English is essential. English proficiency opens doors to various opportunities, such as studying or working abroad, while also enabling individuals to engage in cross-cultural communication (Rido, 2020). As global communication and international markets increasingly rely on English, the ability to speak, read, and write in English has become indispensable (Su et al., 2020). As a result, English proficiency tests like TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) play a critical role in assessing language ability, with implications for both academic and professional success.

TOEIC, specifically, measures English language proficiency in real-world contexts, such as business, commerce, and industry, assessing everyday listening and reading skills necessary for functioning in an international workplace (Trew, 2007). Beyond basic language skills, the TOEIC test also evaluates more specialized knowledge required for workplace communication in English. Developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), TOEIC is based on the theoretical framework of

communicative competence, which emphasizes not just grammatical accuracy, but the ability to understand and use language effectively in context (ETS, 2023). As such, the TOEIC exam evaluates a wide range of language skills, including reading and listening comprehension, which are crucial for effective communication in both personal and professional settings (Im & Cheng, 2019). By using task types like reading documents and listening to conversations, TOEIC assesses a test-taker's ability to navigate real-world situations in English, making it a vital tool for assessing English proficiency in the workplace (Schmidgall, 2017). The exam's scoring system, based on item response theory (IRT), ensures a fair and accurate evaluation of language ability by factoring in the difficulty of questions and the overall distribution of responses.

Given the increasing importance of English proficiency in today's interconnected world, effective TOEIC preparation has become crucial. The urgency of this research lies in understanding the role of TOEIC preparation in enhancing students' performance and ensuring that they are well-equipped for both academic and professional success. By examining the impact of TOEIC preparation on test outcomes, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion about how best to support students in achieving their English language goals, particularly in high-stakes testing situations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Test Preparation (TP)

Test preparation is understood as an intentional intervention aimed at improving test performance. According to Saif et al. (2019), TP involves a variety of activities designed to familiarize students with the test format and content, as well as enhance their skills related to the specific requirements of the exam. Test preparation, especially in the case of high-stakes exams like the TOEIC, plays a critical role in helping students increase their chances of achieving desirable scores. However, the impact of TP on actual learning outcomes is complex. Messick (in Saif et al., 2019) emphasized that TP can sometimes lead to an improvement in test scores without necessarily translating into better overall language proficiency. This phenomenon is known as the "washback effect," wherein test preparation influences not only student performance but also teaching practices.

On the one hand, effective TP provides students with the tools to manage test-taking strategies and become familiar with test formats, reducing anxiety and increasing performance. On the other hand, if TP is too narrowly focused on test strategies, it risks inflating students' scores without improving their real-world language skills (Ma & Cheng, 2018). The latter issue raises concerns about the validity and reliability of the test as an accurate measure of language proficiency. Thus, research into TP explores both the positive impacts and potential drawbacks of this practice.

Impact of Test Preparation on TOEIC Performance

Numerous studies have examined the relationship between test preparation and TOEIC performance. Knoch et al. (2020) explored the effectiveness of various TOEIC test preparation methods, finding that TP had a more significant impact on certain skills, particularly speaking. Their study revealed that specific strategies, such as speaking continuously without pauses and adjusting voice quality, led to higher speaking scores on the TOEIC exam. However, TP had a more limited impact on other language skills, such as listening, reading, and writing, where improvements were less significant. These findings highlight the need for targeted and varied preparation strategies to address the different components of the TOEIC test.

Additionally, Winke and Lim (2017) investigated how TP affects listening performance. Their research suggested that focused preparation for the listening section could lead to notable improvements in students' listening comprehension skills, which are crucial for success on the TOEIC. However, they also noted that TP should involve more than just practice tests; it should include strategies to enhance students' overall language proficiency in various contexts. In contrast, research by Blazar and Pollard (2017) raised concerns about the negative impacts of excessive TP, suggesting that a narrow focus on test-specific preparation might lead to a decline in instructional quality. They argued that TP might encourage students to prioritize test strategies over genuine language learning, leading to an overemphasis on achieving high scores without improving long-term language skills. This observation underscores the importance of balancing test preparation with meaningful language instruction that fosters overall language development.

The Washback Effect of TOEIC Preparation

The washback effect refers to the influence that a test has on teaching, learning, and curriculum development. In the context of TOEIC, research has shown that TP often results in both positive and negative washback. On the positive side, TP can help students familiarize themselves with the test format, which can reduce anxiety and improve their test-taking strategies (Saif et al., 2019). Furthermore, well-designed TP programs can encourage students to engage in focused language practice, which can lead to measurable improvements in test scores (Soler et al., 2020).

On the negative side, however, TP can lead to a situation where students are taught to perform well on the test without necessarily improving their English proficiency (Ma & Cheng, 2018). This is particularly concerning when TP is too heavily focused on exam-specific strategies rather than holistic language development. Dong (2021) emphasized that different tests might exert varying amounts of washback depending on the students' prior knowledge, the teacher's approach, and the resources available for preparation. For example, TOEIC preparation may have

different impacts on students in different contexts, highlighting the need for adaptable and context-sensitive preparation programs.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at exploring the students' difficulties in achieving the targeted score on the TOEIC Prediction Test, particularly focusing on the listening comprehension section. A case study was conducted in September 2024 with 249 students from SMKN 14 Jakarta, who participated in the TOEIC Preparation and Prediction program. This initiative was designed to assess the students' readiness for the yearly TOEIC Test, organized in collaboration with a TOEIC Test Center in Jakarta. The school was selected as the research site due to its long-standing adoption of English standardized test targets and its implementation of TOEIC Preparation to help students achieve satisfactory scores before the official TOEIC Test.

Instrument and Procedure

The TOEIC Prediction Test consists of two sections: Listening and Reading. The Listening Test includes four parts:

- Part 1: Photographs (6 questions)
- Part 2: Question-Response (25 questions)
- Part 3: Conversations (39 questions)
- Part 4: Short Talks (30 questions)

The Reading Test includes three parts:

- Part 1: Fill in the blanks in 30 incomplete sentences
- Part 2: Read four texts, each with four missing words
- Part 3: Answer reading comprehension questions

The test comprises a total of 200 questions, 100 each for listening and reading. Prior to the test, participants were given an explanation of the test format. The researchers utilized Google Forms to distribute the test, which included student data, answer sheets, and questions. Participants were allocated approximately 120 minutes to complete the test.

Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the students' responses from the Google Forms. This method allowed for easy tracking of their answers and helped organize data efficiently. The data were then examined qualitatively to identify common challenges faced by students, particularly in the listening comprehension section. The analysis aimed to highlight specific areas where students struggled and to understand how the TOEIC Preparation could be enhanced to improve overall student performance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research aimed to evaluate the importance of TOEIC preparation before taking the TOEIC Prediction Test or the real TOEIC Test. The study involved 249 students from SMKN 14 Jakarta, who participated in a TOEIC Preparation session followed by a TOEIC Prediction Test. The TOEIC Preparation was held for 4 hours, and afterward, students were given the option to take the TOEIC Prediction Test. Participation in the Prediction Test was voluntary, but all students chose to participate, reflecting their interest in assessing their English proficiency before taking the real TOEIC exam. The results from the TOEIC Prediction Test provided valuable insights into the students' readiness for the TOEIC Real Test. Below is a breakdown of the students' scores:

Table 1: Distribution of TOEIC Prediction Test Scores

No	TOEIC Prediction Score	Number of Students	Percentage
1	800 - 900	3	1.2%
2	700 - 799	13	5.2%
3	600 - 699	29	11.7%
4	500 - 599	59	23.7%
5	400 - 499	25	10%
6	300 - 399	39	15.7%
7	Below 299	81	32.5%

The results from Table 1 highlight the distribution of student performance on the TOEIC Prediction Test. A significant number of students (32.5%) scored below 299, which indicates that over a third of the students faced challenges in achieving even the basic threshold for the test. A notable portion (23.7%) scored between 500 and 599, while 11.7% scored between 600 and 699. Only a small percentage of students (1.2%) achieved scores between 800 and 900. The target score for the TOEIC Prediction Test was set above 400. Based on the results, 129 students (51.8%) achieved scores above 400, while 120 students (48.2%) scored below 300. This suggests that a significant portion of the students may benefit from additional TOEIC preparation to enhance their scores.

The results of this study underscore the critical importance of TOEIC preparation in improving students' readiness for both the TOEIC Prediction Test and the real TOEIC exam. The significant variation in the students' scores highlights the varying levels of proficiency in English, particularly in the listening comprehension section, which has long been a challenge for many English learners. The key findings from the TOEIC Prediction Test suggest that while preparation can yield positive results, a significant portion of students still struggles to meet the desired proficiency levels. These findings have important implications for the design of TOEIC preparation programs, and they also contribute to the existing body of research on test preparation and language proficiency.

One of the novel findings of this study is the large number of students who scored below 300 on the TOEIC Prediction Test (32.5%). This suggests a critical gap in the students' English proficiency, particularly when it comes to listening comprehension, which is a central part of the TOEIC exam. The results indicate that while a portion of students performed well in the prediction test (51.8% scoring above 400), a significant number still lacked the necessary skills to perform at an acceptable level. This highlights a critical need for more intensive and targeted preparation, particularly in the listening section, which has been identified as one of the more challenging areas for test-takers in prior research (Knoch et al., 2020). Moreover, the study also revealed that while some students achieved high scores (e.g., 1.2% scored between 800-900), these high achievers were in the minority, indicating that the preparation program was effective for only a small subset of students. This result calls into question the comprehensiveness of the current TOEIC preparation and suggests that further refinement of teaching techniques, such as more focused listening practice and interactive, real-world applications, might help improve the scores of the majority of students.

The findings of this study align with previous research on the effectiveness of TOEIC preparation programs, particularly in the area of listening comprehension. Winke and Lim (2017) found that preparation can improve students' performance in specific skills, but its impact is often more pronounced in some areas (such as speaking) compared to others (such as listening and reading). This research corroborates their findings, showing that while some students performed well in the reading section, the listening section remained a significant challenge for many.

Moreover, Knoch et al. (2020) emphasized that TOEIC preparation programs can be particularly beneficial for students whose scores are close to the passing mark, with relatively minor score gains making a substantial difference. This study supports that idea, as a large percentage of students (32.5%) scored below 300, indicating that targeted interventions for students at this level could yield substantial benefits. Similarly, Soler et al. (2020) reported modest score gains from test preparation in the Colombian context, which mirrors the results of this study. However, in both studies, the results suggest that although some improvement is seen, a comprehensive strategy is necessary to lift the performance of the majority of students to the desired level.

The findings of this study have significant implications for TOEIC preparation programs. First, the results suggest that while the existing TOEIC preparation program is helpful for a portion of students, many still need more focused and personalized interventions, particularly in listening comprehension. Since a substantial number of students (32.5%) scored below 299, it is crucial to address the specific difficulties students face in this area. Research has shown that listening comprehension is one of the most challenging areas in English proficiency tests (Im & Cheng, 2019), and this study confirms that a similar challenge exists among the students in this study. This finding implies that TOEIC preparation programs should incorporate more interactive listening practice, real-life listening tasks, and more

opportunities for students to engage with spoken English in various accents and contexts.

Furthermore, the results suggest that there is a need for more rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of TOEIC preparation programs. While this study demonstrates the importance of such programs, it also highlights that a "one-size-fits-all" approach may not be sufficient for all students. Tailored preparation programs that focus on students' individual weaknesses, such as intensive listening comprehension training for students who score below 300, could yield better results. Given the small percentage of students who achieved scores above 800, further research is needed to identify the best strategies to help more students reach higher levels of proficiency. Additionally, the voluntary nature of the TOEIC Prediction Test itself raises questions about student motivation and its impact on performance. Students who were already motivated to take the test might have performed better than those who were less engaged. Future studies could investigate the relationship between motivation and test scores, which could provide insights into how to enhance student engagement in TOEIC preparation programs.

This study provides new insights into the effectiveness of TOEIC preparation for students from vocational high schools, particularly in Indonesia, an area not extensively covered in previous research. While prior studies have focused on university students or test-takers from different cultural and educational backgrounds, this study highlights the unique challenges faced by students from a vocational high school in Jakarta, offering a novel contribution to the body of knowledge on TOEIC preparation. Moreover, the study emphasizes the critical importance of listening comprehension, an area that previous research (e.g., Knoch et al., 2020; Winke & Lim, 2017) has identified as a common difficulty, but this study focuses specifically on how preparation impacts this skill.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research confirms the importance of TOEIC preparation in improving students' performance on the TOEIC Prediction Test and the real TOEIC exam. The findings demonstrate that while preparation can significantly benefit students, many still face challenges, especially in listening comprehension. The results of this study underscore the need for more targeted and personalized TOEIC preparation programs, particularly for students who score below the required level. These findings not only support previous research but also contribute new insights into how TOEIC preparation can be tailored to meet the specific needs of students in vocational high schools. Future research should focus on refining TOEIC preparation strategies and examining the role of motivation in achieving higher test scores.

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